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Dordt College Commencement, 2018



by Ethan Brue

Graduates of Dordt College 2018, President Hoekstra and members of the board, faculty, staff, parents, alumni, friends, and family:

There was a college called Dordt, and it almost deserved it. Okay, I realize I just lost a few points for originality, but I needed something catchy, and I was running out of time. Any of you who have taken a voyage on the *Dawn Treader* might track with me. Memorable first lines of stories and the names of graduates printed up here on these diplomas share something in common. They carry far more meaning than syllables, and they never stay the same. So when C. S. Lewis says, “There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it,” we might initially snicker at an unfortunate but ap-

propriate naming, but our snickering fades as we see the same name become a metaphor for transformation, forgiveness, baptism by “un-dragon-ing,” and restoration. The name hasn’t changed, typographically speaking, but by the end of the story it’s transformed and filled out; it will never be the same for the reader again.

So when I say, “There was a college called Dordt, and it almost deserved it,” I truly hope we all deserve it, or at least are moving toward deserving it. As you might know, we are in the process of celebrating the 400th Anniversary of the Synod of Dort, our institution’s namesake, and in the name of full disclosure, I haven’t always been the biggest fan of the Canons of Dort.

I’m an outsider, a transplant from a garden variety, middle-American evangelical tradition. While I’ve come to deeply appreciate the Belgic Confessions and find the Heidelberg Catechism one of the most beautiful of catechisms, as reformational as I may have become, the Canons of Dort don’t seem to belong to me. But you know how it goes: if you are around someone long enough, like a college roommate, he or she sort of starts to grow on you. This happens, however, not by focusing on the details, the quirky habits—that is typically counterproductive—but rather by stepping back and seeing the whole person—the whole document—more than just the name.

Commencements are backward events. No matter how many times people note that to “commence” means “to begin,” everything today suggests that we are at an end. You are finished. After all these years of school, binders emptied,

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textbooks shelved, dorms cleaned, there is the emptiness, and you'll hear the room echo again, like it did on that first day. For better or worse, commencements will always feel like backward beginnings.

Before I get too far along...For those of you non-auditory learners who prefer problem solving, here's something to pass the time. What is better? To take two steps backward and one step forward, or to take one step forward and two steps backward? While you work on that problem, I'll continue talking.

"Class of 2018. This is an important day." Do you know how many commencement speakers are out there saying the same thing. I don't mean to disappoint you, but commencements, like births and, yes, even funerals, are rather ordinary occurrences. I was thumbing through a recent copy of *Christianity Today* this past week. It was an issue wholly dedicated to the life and work of the evangelist Billy Graham, honoring him after his final commencement this spring. I realize Billy Graham is not associated with your generation or mine, but it is likely that your grandparents might know of him if you don't. Now I certainly don't always see eye to eye with Billy Graham, but maybe as an engineer there is something I appreciate about him. The genius of Billy Graham was his uncanny ability to keep it simple—Christ died for sinners, the likes of you and me. Graduates, don't ever forget it.

Which brings me back to the Canons of Dort. I know this is going to seem very odd, and I seriously wonder if Billy Graham and the Canons of Dort have ever appeared in the same sentence, let alone in the same commencement address. I'm certainly not going to attempt the feat of theologically reconciling these traditions. But I do wonder what it would look like if we were to take the Canons of Dort and do a Billy Graham-like distillation on it. Our namesake, "Dordt," might resonate like this:

It is impossible to know or measure how far God stoops, how much God gives, how long God calls, how patiently God waits, and how lovingly God holds.

Or if you prefer singing synodical reports, try...

The love of God is greater far, than tongue or pen can even tell, it goes beyond the highest star, and reaches to the lowest hell... Oh, love of God, how rich and pure! How measureless and strong! It shall forevermore endure—The saints' and angels' song.

There are brief moments when a synod in the Netherlands in 1618 might just harmonize with a sound bite from Yankee Stadium in 1957. That's what Dordt means.

However, I would do an injustice to the name "Dordt" if I left you behind at a synod or a stadium altar call. If this is all that is contained in the name of Dordt, then we have, for all practical purposes, made it no farther than the admissions office. Don't get me wrong: dying with Christ and becoming dead to sin, day after day, is a non-negotiable for our lives lived *Coram Deo*.

In fact, maybe we should change our online admissions form a bit with a few additional questions. Please answer all that apply: Have you died yet? Yes or No. Are you in the process of dying? Yes or No. Do you have plans to do so before arriving at Dordt or will you need assistance?

But seriously, here is the main problem. Dordt's curriculum has one critical prerequisite. You can't get into Resurrection 101 if you're not dead yet, and Resurrection 101 is a co-requisite for every other course at Dordt. If Dordt is to stay true to its mission, this will not change. My hope is that very little of what you learn here will make any coherent sense to you at all apart from the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the initiation of the cosmic re-creation and restoration project that he is busily working on, even as I speak. Without the resurrection, every lab report, paper, composition, design project, or work of art—even every diploma—is nothing more than a meaningless wisp of smoke, and to hold it out to you this morning is to send you out chasing after the wind with only a piece of paper, as our colleague in Ecclesiastes reminds us.

In one sense, there is never anything new under the sun. But commencements and other such events do sometimes feel new—in a small way. I don't know how common the experience of be-

ing a first parent is, but my wife and I distinctly remember leaving the hospital with our oldest daughter just over 22 years ago to the surprising reality that everyone was back at work already. Not only were they back at work, but, in fact, we soon found out that no one had taken any time off at all! Here was this exhausting, life-changing, world-stopping, miraculous event—and no one else seemed to notice. Graduates, don't take this the wrong way, because when you were born some 22 or more years ago, you really did make a small world stop spinning on its axis, but you should also know that the bigger one kept spinning.

The experience of tragedy is a parallel. For those who have walked this path, your world comes to a screeching halt, and long before you can catch your breath or regain any sense of balance, you are acutely aware of your dissonance with the world around you—a world that grinds on, never skipping a beat, in joy and in pain. There is nothing new under the sun. The professor in Ecclesiastes keeps writing this on the board, day after day.

But here's my plug for not skipping class: the professor has more to offer. As he moves into "Dead Week" (a.k.a. the last week before finals), he gives you this last bit of advice:

You who are young, be happy while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgement (Ecclesiastes 11:9).

At first glance, this sounds like typical parental advice: go ahead and have some fun, but not too much fun... because...well...you know. But David Gibson, in his book on Ecclesiastes, *Living Life Backwards*, suggests that we often come at this verse from the wrong direction. In this passage, enjoyment is not an option. It is a command.

To embrace authentic God-given pleasure, says Gibson,

...is a divine decree that we ignore at our peril. For it is precisely in enjoying the world God has made that we show we have grasped the goodness of the God we say we love. Failure to enjoy is an offense, not merely an oversight...[;] not to live gladly, joyfully, and not to drink deeply from the wells of abundant goodness that God has lavished on us, is sin, and it is sin because it is a denial of who he is. It is a denial of God's covenant blessing. (136, 138)

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For Gibson, this denial is nothing more than the repetition of the first sin in the garden—pride—our diabolical belief that God was holding something back and not giving us the good stuff. The warning of judgement comes not to those who might celebrate too much, but to those

who refuse to celebrate at all.

But commanding you to enjoy life may seem like just one more assignment. And for some of you, your world may be spinning with uncertainty, stress, or post-graduation to-do lists—and the last thing you need today is to figure out where to start on another assignment. So let me conclude by trying my hand at one more Billy Graham simplification with a reformational flavor. I need Psalm 23:1 for this:

When the Lord is your shepherd, you lack nothing.

It doesn't get much simpler than that.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want": you know this before you are even in sight of green pastures and quiet waters, before you have your road map after graduation, before dark valleys, before you need comfort like never before, before you can smell supper in the oven, before you feel the pounding feet of goodness and mercy breathing down your neck, before you realize you've just inherited an apartment for life. Before all this you are told, "When the Lord is your

shepherd, you lack nothing.” It’s the pastoral way to simply say, “God rules, and you’re in.”

Psalm 23 is backward, but so is dying first, and so is resurrecting and restoring, and so is making joy a requirement rather than an elective in a tough curriculum, and so are hymns that try to tell us that “though the wrong seems all so strong, God is the ruler yet!” It’s all backward.

So for those of you who are still struggling with that math problem I gave you at the beginning, I haven’t forgotten you. You may have come to the conclusion that two steps back and one step forward is identical to one step forward and two steps back, but you’re not doing resurrection calculus correctly. If you are following the shepherd, the path is always as important as the destination, and if the first step seems backward and out of order, you are likely on the right path.

Names change. You need to know that for however many years you have been here, you have made Dordt a better place—the name Dordt is now a richer name. Thank you. Thank you for carrying our interesting and odd little name with you. I hope it will always make you look out of place, backwards, and somewhat foolish in a “Good News” sort of way.

For the last sixty-plus years, I’d like to think that the name Dordt has undergone a healthy transformation. I hope that by God’s grace it has grown to mean far more than what can be con-

tained in a 17th -century synodical document. So if you are making a cheat sheet, here is what I have so far. The name of Dordt means,

- God’s love is astronomical—literally.
- Die early, die often—it’s a prerequisite.
- Resurrections reverse everything—absolutely everything.
- Joy is a requirement, not an elective.
- God rules.

Feel free to add to that what you’ve learned so far at Dordt and in life—I’m sure I’ve missed a few things.

And if that is not simple enough, how about a two-word summary of it all.

Free food.

It’s right there in Psalm 23. Read it again. A first snapshot of what God is preparing right now, right in front of us. A world beyond our imagination, so beautiful that God is planning on permanently camping there as well—with us. Can your spirit-filled imagination smell it? Maybe even begin to re-create it?

So graduates, my final charge to you is this:

Stay hungry, and don’t forget to invite others (even enemies).

When God cooks, there is always way, way, way too much.

When the Lord is your Shepherd. You lack nothing. Shalom.